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Branding Ghana: "A Home Away from Home"

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ABSTRACT

Ghana being a developing nation should embark on a national rebranding campaign to change its image domestically and internationally. This paper focuses on ways in which the Ghanaian government can achieve its goals, where the campaign wouldn't just be another governmental propaganda, but prove worthy of taxpayers' money, with the effects witnessed by all.

INTRODUCTION

The concept of country branding is a somewhat new phenomenon that's fast becoming more and more important in today's age of globalization. To help boost a country forward and to strategically position it in such a way as to attract foreign investment, a country's image is crucial. That's where country branding comes into play. So what does it mean to brand a country? We can take our cue from what it means to brand a product or service: to give it or highlight certain attributes that clearly distinguish it from its competitors. According to Uche Nworah, "country branding is the process whereby a country actively seeks to create a unique and competitive identity for itself, with the aim of positioning the country internally and internationally as a good destination for trade, tourism and investments". (Nworah. *Nigeria as a Brand*. 2005). Some countries have been highly successful at this whereby they are famous tourist sites (Jamaica, Italy, Maldives), have a high prestige for goods made in their countries (Germany, America, France, Japan) or have become a destination for transnational corporations to outsource their manufacturing bases (India, China, Taiwan). Whatever it took for these countries to clearly distinguish themselves, it must have involved a series of professional, organized and coordinated strategies that involved all aspects of their societies. During his term in office, the former President of Ghana, John Agyekum Kuffour made frequent visits overseas in an attempt to promote the country's image to attract foreign investment. Many locals were complaining that the visits didn't benefit the country in any way as the President had to focus his attention on the nations mounting internal problems. His move however did attract quite a number of foreign investors both within and outside the continent: like MTN, Africa's largest telecommunications provider, GT Bank and Procredit both from Nigeria, Kasapa mobile telecommunications, Anglo Gold, the British company that bought most of the state-owned Obuasi Gold Fields. The influx of such investments really stimulated the economy by providing not only jobs, but also healthy competition in the banking and telecommunications sectors. One area however received little attention and that was tourism.

TOURISM AND GDP

According to the World Travel and Tourism Council, the contribution of Travel & Tourism to Jamaica's Gross Domestic Product is expected to rise from 27.0% (JMD298.3 bn or US \$3,984.7 mn) in 2009 to 30.4% (JMD754.1 bn or US\$7,099.1 mn) by 2019. The contribution of the travel and tourism economy to the country's employment is expected to rise from 276,000 jobs in 2009, 23.7% of total employment or 1 in every 4.2 jobs to 351,000 jobs, 26.9% of total employment or 1 in every 3.7 jobs by 2019. In Maldives the projections are also similar: The contribution of travel and tourism to Gross Domestic Product is expected to rise from 59.7% (MVR10,782.8 mn or US\$842.4 mn) in 2009 to 47.9% (MVR16,423.5 mn or US\$1,283.1 mn) by 2019. (World Travel and Tourism Council 2007). Thus, one can hardly argue that tourism does contribute a large percentage to the GDP's of these two small developing countries. That means that the governments of these countries have been able to promote their countries in such a way as to take huge advantage of the opportunities that tourism provides. So now let's take a look at the contribution that tourism makes to Ghana's GDP: it is expected to decline from 7.6% to 6.9%. So tourism only contributes approximately 8% to Ghana's GDP and that even is projected to fall to 7%! These facts go to emphasize the importance that the country's leaders need to take a closer look at enhancing Ghana's image as a tourist destination. In order to brand Ghana, the government would have to repackage and sell its image by highlighting certain features that clearly distinguish it from other African states.

HOW COULD GHANA DISTINGUISH HERSELF?

Just as Egypt has been branded as the "Land of the Pharaohs" because of its ancient pyramids and sand dunes, Ghana can be marketed as a country with a dark past but a promising future. The many slave castles along its coast and modern day signs of development attest to this fact. History and modern leisure can be mingled as these castles and holiday resorts sit side by side on white sand beaches littered with swaying coconut trees. Each with a story to tell, one of a painful past the other inviting you to come embrace the local landscape, relax and feel the stress ebb away with each splash of the waves. For each product marketed, there's a target group and that would be the millions of African Americans and Caribbeans in the Diaspora that seek to reconnect with their past, find their homeland and to know their "roots". At the same time, they would have a perfect opportunity to establish broken ties with their native brothers and sisters who never left the shores: it could be the perfect family re-union. Europeans and other international tourists will also be encouraged to see for themselves a piece of history and also soak in the sun's rays for a good suntan. In the southern part of Germany, the town of Dachau, thousands of tourists flock there every year to visit the Nazi concentration camps- to relive one of history's worst horrors while at the same time have a feel of the vibrant German culture. The visits to the concentration camps remind them of a dark and painful history that should never be forgotten while at the same time revealing the extent to which human corruption and evil can go. The beer festivals and pubs in Munich cater to the carefree traveler who has a thirst for exquisitely brewed beer and a vibrant night life. Thus a visit to Germany caters to the soul as well as the taste buds.

Unlike all or most holiday resorts in Africa that just offer a temporary getaway sensation, Ghana could market herself as a destination that offers healing and reconciliation between the races- she could offer more than the physical, but the spiritual as well.

ACHIEVING THE GOAL LOCALLY

However, in order to achieve this goal, a consistent strategy involving the whole country and media would have to be laid and carried out. The most important responsibility would be with the government in restructuring and remodeling the local landscape. That would mean to change and improve the physical infrastructure that locals and tourists see. The Accra Metropolitan Assembly as well as her counterpart the Kumasi Metropolitan Assembly would have to embark on an intensive clean-up exercise to rid the streets of rubbish, choked gutters, squatters and petty traders in the capital and major tourist destinations. The government in the past did this but somehow the effects were only felt for a few weeks and then it was back to business as usual. Thus an effective, ongoing system of rubbish collection, street sweeping and police patrol must be put in place. Shanty towns with dilapidated buildings need to be torn down and replaced with well organized residential and commercial centers. These are the first things the government should embark on so that both locals and tourists can appreciate the natural beauty of the country in a clean and orderly environment.

Another way for the government to invest in the tourism sector is to develop natural scenery into tourist attractions. The Volta lake should be a place lined with five-star hotels using traditional architecture; chalets with spas overlooking the lake; a huge water theme park with water sports; camping sites; boat cruises etc. The Mole National park should also be equipped with more Jeeps and park rangers for the safaris and its staff have to be well paid, so that they aren't tempted to get involved in poaching activities. I would go further to say that the government should not rely solely on the few tourist sites the country has, but seek to build new ones that would offer tourists a wider variety of places to visit. Slave castles and forts have to be renovated to preserve their form and structure and also prevent them from becoming safety hazards. In addition first class roads and railway lines have to be built to link all major cities and towns. All these developments would not only attract more foreign tourists but also local ones who would be glad to spend their money on a worthy trip

An important point which should not be overlooked is for the country to have a steady supply of water and electricity 365 days a year. With all the power and water shortages the country has been experiencing for the past decade, life can be difficult, leaving people frustrated and dissatisfied with the way the government runs its public facilities. With this ongoing problem, people have lost a considerable amount of confidence in the country and it in turn has gone a long way to damage the country's self image. If the citizens are dissatisfied with not being able to have a steady supply of basic amenities, how would foreigners who have spent a lot of money and time to visit the country feel? What would their impressions be of a country that can't provide enough water and electricity for its citizens? It can be certain that when they leave, they would carry their experiences and impressions back to their home countries and the nation's image would be tarnished internationally.

If the government first puts the entire basic infrastructure into place, it would naturally cause a buzz within the media as people would clearly see for themselves the government's aim. I chose to talk about the visuals first because people are mostly influenced by what they see and witness. If the government were to start broadcasting on the airwaves and newspapers its intention to make Ghana a major tourist destination in Africa without doing anything to change the physical landscape, it would become a laughing stock. People would see it as another governmental propaganda and lose their confidence in it. If the C.E.O in any firm or organization wants to put forward a goal or plan for the organization, he must first ensure that he sells his ideas to his staff. He must convince them with tangible evidence and facts that his way is the best for the organization. If they don't buy into it, you can best be sure that his shareholders and customers wouldn't.

This goes on to my second point, just like the C.E.O of the firm, the government must reel its people in. It must make them feel like they form a crucial part of its plan. It must promote its ideas to its own people, to gain their confidence. Many governments in Africa have zero population confidence due to various reasons: bribery, corruption, misplaced priorities, failing to keep their promises, and the list goes on. If the Ghanaian government wants to brand the country as a tourist attraction, it has to make the locals see themselves as being part of the picture. My earlier proposition was to make Ghana a place where African Americans in the Diaspora and people from the Caribbean can reunite with their stolen past, to be welcomed them back "home". So how do the locals fit in? The government through education and media can educate its people on the effects of the slave trade and the importance of re-establishing ties with our fellow brothers and sisters in the Diaspora. The government must also put in a lot of effort into changing people's ideas that brands all African Americans and Caribbeans as mere tourists- people to sell arts and crafts to. They should go further to strike a cord of brotherhood between us and them and to make us feel as though we have a common ancestry. If it does this successfully, public reception toward them would be warm and welcoming and it would enhance their feeling of coming back "home". The government at the same time must strike an appeal to its target market. It must also promote its "Ghana as a home away from home" concept to them. To make them view the country as a travel destination, a worthy competitor to Rome, Germany, Jamaica and Paris.

African Americans over the years have been climbing up the social ladder at an unprecedented rate like seen never before in history. This means that many of them have certain financial privileges that former generations didn't have, traveling being one of them. Given their cultural and historical peculiarity, this makes them an ideal target group. The government could reach them by advertising in prestigious Black-run magazines like Ebony, Essence and Vibe. She can also advertise on global news networks like CNN and BBC. Trendy social websites like Facebook, Hi5 and Flixster offer ample opportunity to reach a worldwide audience.

BRANDING ON THE INTERNATIONAL SCENE

Only after doing all this can the government embark on an international branding campaign to distinguish the country from its competitors. It must start by altering people's perceptions of Africa. Like Wally Olins put it "Branding in this context means looking at the way in which the totality of the organization in reality is compared to the way in which it is perceived and trying to relate the one more closely to the other"(An interview with Wally Olins: how to brand a nation). Most people associate Africa with war, famine, disease, AIDS, dictatorship, corruption, poverty, savagery and any other negative stereotypes. The truth is though these things do exist in some parts of the continent, peace, development, democracy and the rule of law does prevail in other countries-Ghana being one of them. Despite my aforementioned problems the country faces, it is seen as one country with loads of potential for growth. So how can people's perception and reality be merged? That is a huge task. The government can begin by liaising with the news media, both local and international to showcase positive images thus throwing a new light on the country. Ghana has enjoyed peace, stability and some measure of economic growth since her independence in 1957. Though still a developing country, it ranks high as a country with lots of potential for development and growth. Crime, chaos and corruption are pretty low compared to other countries and the level of development is much higher than most expect for an African country. These positive images should be portrayed in the media as this is a sure way to alter people's negative perceptions. It should be done so excellently that whenever the name "Ghana" is mentioned the general perception is positive. If this is not done, all previous efforts to promote the country's image will be hindered by the negative branding the continent already has.

DESPITE ALL THE MARKETING STRATEGIES

However, despite all this media work, it is crucial to emphasize that the economic, political and social climate should be transformed before any effective branding scheme can take place. As Fan put it "facial makeup will not help a cancer patient feel healthy" (Fan. *Branding The Nation: What is being branded?*). Usually countries receive negative reviews because of historical and present circumstances. These come about by peoples experiences in a country- thus their negative branding are usually based on fact as they are backed by genuine, tangible social, political and economic problems. So to re-brand a nation without changing the problem is like whitewashing a tomb. The government and the central bank would have to develop an efficient strategy on stabilizing the economy by lowering inflation and interest rates to attract more foreign investment. Research and development need to be promoted, agriculture, education and healthcare all have to be a priority. "The nation brand cannot assert itself, as the tangible sources from which its value is accrued are not in place. It is not sufficient for the country to promote its image enthusiastically to other nations if the economic basis for the nation brand is not there" (Fan. 2006).

CONCLUSION

If the concept of making Ghana a "home away from home" is to be successful, the natives must first feel like the country is a home worth staying and living in, if not, it can be guaranteed that the targeted tourists would not invest a dime of their hard-earned money in making a trip there.

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